



## **A Quick Trip Through the History of Capitol Hill**

Hosted by: Scott Simon

January 4, 2007

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6724095>

Deputy Historian of the House Fred Beuttler provides a lesson about the United States Congress and the U.S. Capitol.

This TALK OF THE NATION. We're broadcasting live today from the U.S. Capitol from - oh, I'm sorry. Well, we are in fact broadcasting live from the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. We hope you'll follow the continuing coverage of the opening of the new Congress on ALL THINGS CONSIDERED and on our Web site, [npr.org](http://www.npr.org).

Well, as I've mentioned probably one time too many now, we've been broadcasting live from the U.S. Capitol for the opening of this new Congress from the remarkably unromantic sounding room H-144 in the Senate side of the Capitol. But this is an absolutely beautiful room with frescos by Constantine Brumidi.

And here to tell us more about what we're seeing in front of us and a few other facts of Congressional history is Fred Beuttler, deputy historian of the House.

Mr. Beuttler, thanks very much for being with us.

Mr. FRED BEUTTLE (Deputy Historian, House of Representatives): Good afternoon.

SIMON: We are looking at a fresco of Cincinnatus. And if you could tell us how it got there, because Constantine Brumidi was essentially having this job audition here, wasn't he?

Mr. BEUTTLE: Yes, in many ways. He was born in 1805 in Rome and he studied there, began his studies. And he actually became a painter in the Vatican and painted a portrait of Pope Pius the IX. And he was also the captain of the Civic Guard. And what happened

in 1848, there was a revolution and he was on the wrong side of the revolution.

And he fled from Rome, was imprisoned for a little while. And after that he was pardoned by the pope with a sort of agreement that he'd flee to America. And he came to the United States as a painter of the Vatican. And he more or less applied for the job of artist of the Capitol. And this room - H-144 - is where he did his job audition in many ways.

SIMON: So he was in many ways - we're talking about a man who was fleeing the old world for religious freedom in the new world?

Mr. BEUTTLER: Not so much religious freedom, but political freedom.

SIMON: Political freedom.

Mr. BEUTTLER: It was a liberal democratic revolution in 1848 that swept most of European monarchies, and most of them lost, the liberal democrats lost. And many of them came over to the United States as an asylum for political refugees.

SIMON: So how did he wind up painting that remarkable fresco of Cincinnatus? Because Cincinnatus is a figure - and maybe we understand it better now - that was considered to have great pertinence to American history.

Mr. BEUTTLER: Absolutely, because Cincinnatus is the - the image that you see is really one of the first ones that he painted. And during that time of the Roman Republic it was under some severe military strain, and the leaders in Rome went to Cincinnatus at the plow and asked him to lead their nation, lead the Republic, save the Republic. And one of the most significant things about Cincinnatus is not only did he take the command of the Roman republic from the plow, but when he was done he gave the power back to the Roman Senate.

And one of the most famous paintings inside the Capital Rotunda is Washington giving over his commission back to Congress after the American Revolution. That was one of the paintings painted by Trumbull, Washington's chief of staff, designed in the Capitol Rotunda. So it's a very important image of Cincinnatus giving back his military authority back to the civilian authorities.

SIMON: So the link between Cincinnatus and George Washington was something that a lot of people found very obvious and very inspiring?

Mr. BEUTTLER: Absolutely.

SIMON: I wanted to ask you some questions while we have the opportunity of having you. I've always wondered about - what's a doorkeeper?

Mr. BEUTTLER: Well, there is no official doorkeeper anymore. That was an older office; that actually was one of the first that started in the first Congress. First Congress had a sergeant at arms who was there to keep order, but also a doorkeeper to make sure that people wouldn't come in and out. The early House started to be a public institution, open to the public.

The Senate for a number of years was not public. Up until 1796, the Senate was not public. But the House was, and thus it became really an area where large numbers of people wanted to go into the gallery and watch. And a sergeant at arms but also the doorkeeper were there to keep order.

SIMON: Now who is the gentleman, or woman - I think I've only seen gentleman who go Mr. Speaker the President of the United States. Fishbait Miller is the one I remember.

Mr. BEUTTLER: Yes, Fishbait Miller. Yes. He was doorkeeper. Now usually it's the sergeant at arms who does that. This morning, Bill Livingood, the sergeant at arms, came in and announced Speaker Pelosi, or Ms. Pelosi, coming in to be elected speaker.

SIMON: And is the doorkeeper - is he appointed - he or she - or the sergeant at arms rather, is he or she appointed by the Capitol police, by the speaker, by...

Mr. BEUTTLER: Well, the sergeant at arms is one of the elected offices of the House. As you saw, maybe individuals watching on television, but you saw the election of the speaker, and then the swearing in of the members, and then you had the election of the officers: clerk, chief administrative officer, and sergeant at arms and chaplain.

And this time, and a very historic time because this time, while there is a change in majorities, for the first time in - I believe it's for the first time, the sergeant at arms is

retained from the previous majority. And so Wilson Livingood, who is, by the way, the first professional law-enforcement officer to serve in the position of sergeant at arms, he is the one to be retained by the Democratic majority from the previous Republican majority.

SIMON: It probably wouldn't be good for them to change that every time it changes control, right? You want a figure who has some street-cred on both sides of the aisle.

Mr. BEUTTLER: Absolutely.

SIMON: I must say, when we got here today and were setting up our equipment, I found myself very moved on this day, when so many U.S. representatives and senators were being sworn in, to see the families and the onlookers gathering. I just found that very moving to see so many bright, shining, tearing eyes. It must be an extraordinary moment for everyone.

Mr. BEUTTLER: Absolutely, absolutely. It actually brought a tear to my eye as I was watching from the press gallery and saw many - this one daughter of a member holding a Bible for the member to be sworn in on. It just brings a tear to your eye to see the families and all the children that are present on the floor.

SIMON: Do you have to - by the way, this takes up a question that obviously is of quite current interest. Do you have to have your - you have to raise your hand, or do you have to have your hand on any work of literature or any book?

Mr. BEUTTLER: No, the tradition in the House is you just simply raise your right hand and you say the oath. There's usually nothing in left, although members are free to bring anything in.

What is going on now is in the Rayburn Room, which is also a historic room in the House, where you have kind of a reenactment of the swearing-in. And there, individuals will bring in Bibles and everything. It's a photo-op, but an informal swearing-in ceremony, and that's taking place actually this afternoon.

Usually speakers will have a time where individual members, usually new members, have their photograph taken and sort of reenact the swearing-in.

SIMON: We sometimes speak to - in fact, members of Congress who complain about the effect of having the U.S. Congress on television. They think it promotes a certain amount of showboating and people taking the stage, essentially, in a virtually empty chamber to make a speech that's intended not for anyone else to hear but just people back in their home district.

That being said, is Congress a bit more decorous than it was, say, 100, 150 years ago?

Mr. BEUTTLER: Well, as far as I know, nobody brings in revolvers anymore.

SIMON: But people used to do that.

Mr. BEUTTLER: But they used to, yes. They used back in - especially before the Civil War. We saw today a very civil procedure where you have an election and a change in majority, an election of the speaker that took place in just a few minutes' time with a roll-call vote.

But back just before the Civil War they had - it took over a month, with 44 separate votes, in order to get a speaker just because of how divided the country was just before the Civil War.

SIMON: And there have been occasional brawls in the House of Representatives.

Mr. BEUTTLER: There have been brawls on the House floor. And one of the more amusing times is there was a major brawl that took place, again a sectional controversy, where almost like a baseball stadium where, you know, both sides empty and they sort of brawl in the center.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. BEUTTLER: And at one point, one of the members grabbed the other man's wig and it came right off, and that sort of stopped everything because everybody burst out in laughter and a sort of civility sort of returned to the House floor.

SIMON: We had quite a turnover with this new Congress coming into this building, this chamber, and I'm wondering what that entails, all the packing up, all the unpacking.

Some people get moved to offices they don't necessarily like. Some people who have more grand positions than they used to have get moved into offices which are just terrific. How does that - who makes those decisions? How is that...

Mr. BEUTTLER: Well, it's interesting to kind of watch this because immediately after the election, that first week, the new freshmen came in and they had a lottery of the new rooms available. And from what I understand from the superintendent's office, about 180 different offices were moved. And since each member has three individual rooms, that means over 500 different rooms of furniture were moved in about four weeks, four or five weeks' time, and they were completed just before Christmas.

Right after Christmas, the leadership offices were moved. And now we still have committee offices and the changing of majority, majority staff and committees. That will take place over the next two, three weeks. So it's quite a bit of moving that takes place here on Capitol Hill.

SIMON: Do members get to pick their own furniture, their own artwork?

Mr. BEUTTLER: Their own artwork. There's kind of a standard furniture, desks and that kind of thing. But they do get to design their own rooms and the color on the walls and the drapes, put it that way.

SIMON: The statuary as you walk around The Capitol - I mean, actually inside this chamber that we're talking about - is extraordinary. I saw a statue of Jack Swigert, the astronaut, that I didn't know was there.

Mr. BEUTTLER: Each state is allowed to have two statues, and actually that starts back really after the new House chamber opens in 1857-58. What you have is what to do with the old House chamber, and the House tries to figure out what to do with it. That's currently Statuary Hall.

For a little while, they had peddlers and it was kind of a place for lobbyists, but also individuals selling things there for a little while. But during the Civil War they decided that was not decorous enough, and so they decided to create National Statuary Hall. And what that is is a place, a ceremonial space where states can present a statue - two statues of their own choosing.

It has to be out of bronze or marble, and it has to be of someone who's deceased. But the most recent statue - it took quite a long time for all the 100 statues to come in, but the most recent statute was Po'pay from New Mexico.

SIMON: But when Jack Swigert - now, I'm trying to remember, forgive me, what state he represented, but...

Mr. BEUTTLER: I'm not quite sure.

SIMON: I didn't mean to put you on the spot. We were walking past it quickly. But he must have replaced someone else. They must have had to decide that that state...

Mr. BEUTTLER: There have been a few that have been replaced, but that's not usually the case. Many of them take place in the late 19th century, the states come in. But really over the last couple of years new statues have emerged and have been presented.

What happens, according to custom, is that for the first six months of a statue coming in, it is allowed to be in the rotunda. After that point, the statue is moved out of the rotunda and either in Statuary Hall or along the Hall of Columns or in some other areas of The Capitol.

SIMON: By the way, you're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News. And we're speaking with Fred Beuttler, deputy historian of the House of Representatives, who joins us here in - I guess I can call it Studio H144.

The room we're in right now gets used for Appropriations Committee meetings, or...

Mr. BEUTTLER: Yes, for Appropriations Committee meetings. There are also a few other ceremonial uses for it, too.

SIMON: Who decides what goes where in the course of the day, and does it take up a lot of time?

Mr. BEUTTLER: I'm not sure - course of the day. What...

SIMON: Who decides that Appropriations meets here or they have too many people

because of press interests, so they have to meet somewhere else.

Mr. BEUTTLER: There are schedulers. But by rule, the speaker of the House controls all space south of the centerpiece of the rotunda. And so there are schedulers within the speaker's office. Other committees will have control over certain spaces, but those are assigned by the speaker in the beginning of a Congress.

SIMON: Mr. Beuttler, what do you enjoy most about your job?

Mr. BEUTTLER: Well, today was a historic day, to actually watch the first woman speaker of the House, something that has never happened before. That's in many ways one of the most exciting things. Also, a large part of my job is talking to people, talking to students, talking to citizens, bringing tours and explaining not so much the architecture of The Capitol but the history, what goes on and what has gone on in this building.

SIMON: How long have they had women's rooms here available for member, because now we have a speaker?

Mr. BEUTTLER: Now we have a speaker. Well, the Lindy Boggs Room was actually a caucus room, and that was turned into a women's reading room in the late 1970s.

SIMON: I meant restroom.

Mr. BEUTTLER: Oh, restrooms. That I'm not quite sure of.

SIMON: OK. Well, Mr. Beuttler, you knew everything else. It's been a delight to talk to you. Thanks very much.

Mr. BEUTTLER: Thank you.

SIMON: Fred Beuttler, deputy historian of the House of Representatives, joined us here in The Capitol.